Lost in translation?
Translation as a valid tool for the EFL classroom

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Abstract: The use of translation in foreign language classrooms seems to have fallen into oblivion. In fact, a wealth of works has advised against its use. However, some recent works also indicate that the L1 might be a very useful tool when learning a new language. The present study aims to contribute to this debate by testing the effectiveness of a reverse translation activity (Spanish into English) in the acquisition of English by 15 Spanish students in the 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education in high school. The study focuses on several grammatical structures as well as on a set of vocabulary items through a treatment-post-test design. The learners were also asked to fill in a questionnaire with their impressions about the activity. The results showed that translation was very helpful for both the acquisition of vocabulary and the grammatical structures with the only exception of the structure "be used to". The answers from the students' questionnaires also showed that the activity was motivating for them. In light of these results, the value of translation in high school is discussed and possible lines for future research are indicated.

Resumen: El uso de la traducción en las clases de lenguas extranjeras parece haber caído en el olvido. Incluso se ha escrito mucho en contra de su uso. No obstante, estudios recientes indican que la L1 puede ser una herramienta muy útil en el aprendizaje de una nueva lengua extranjera. El presente estudio pretende ser una aportación a este debate comprobando la eficacia de una actividad de traducción inversa (castellano a inglés) en el aprendizaje de inglés de un grupo de 15 estudiantes de lengua materna castellano que cursan 4º de E.S.O. Para ello, se diseñó una prueba de traducción centrada en varias estructuras gramaticales y en una serie de palabras y se comprobó su eficacia mediante un diseño de tratamiento y post-test. También se pidió a los estudiantes cumplimentar un cuestionario indicando sus impresiones sobre la actividad. Los resultados obtenidos mostraron que la traducción fue una actividad muy útil tanto para la adquisición de vocabulario como de estructuras gramaticales, con la única excepción de la estructura "be used to". Las opiniones de los estudiantes sobre el ejercicio dejaron claro que, para ellos, fue una actividad motivadora. A la vista de los resultados, es posible debatir el valor del uso de la traducción en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en los institutos, por lo que se indican posibles líneas de investigación.

1. Introduction

At the dawn of language teaching methodologies, translation constituted a significant part of English Language Teaching and this remained so for a long time. Then, with the arrival and total dominance of communicative methodologies, it became a significant missing part for just as long. On the belief that the L1 should not be used in the classroom, translation was quickly consigned to oblivion. However, and despite controversial views on the topic, translation activities have gradually regained ground in some communicative classrooms. Nevertheless, this revival has adopted a different approach: students now use translation to learn, rather than learning to translate (Polio and Duff, 1994).

Within this context, the aim of the present study is to carry out a translation activity in the English language classroom in order to assess students' response regarding motivation and to check, as far as possible, if translation enhances learning.

2. Translation in language teaching: The Prince Dethroned

Translation was a key element of the Grammar Translation Method, which did not represent a positive learning experience for many: as well as learners memorizing huge lists of rules and vocabulary, this method involved translating whole literary or historic texts word-for-word. Unsurprisingly, new methodologies tried to improve on this. The Direct or Natural Method established in Germany and France around 1900 was a response to the obvious problems associated with the Grammar Translation Method. In the Direct Method the teachers and the learners avoid using the native language and just use the target language. Translation is banished and oral teaching comes before any other kind of reading and writing activities. After a short popularity in the beginning of the 20th century, the Direct Method soon began to lose its appeal because of these constraints. It then paved the way to the Audiolingual Method.

The Audiolingual Method has a lot of similarities with the Direct Method. Both were generated as a reaction against the shortcomings of the Grammar Translation Method, both reject the use of the mother tongue and both stress that the speaking and listening competences precede the reading and writing competences.

Subsequent humanistic methodologies such as the Silent Way, Total Physical Response and communicative approaches moved even further away from the L1, and provide further objections to translation. Communicative Language Teaching could be said to be the product of educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the Audiolingual and Grammar-translation methods of foreign language instruction. It places great emphasis on helping students use the target language in a variety of contexts and places great emphasis on learning language functions (Cunningham, 2000).

With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching, translation did not only remain out of favor but it was also given a bad press: it was deemed uncommunicative, tedious, difficult, inane and irrelevant to everyday practice, as it develops a special skill –that of converting texts– that only professional translators will need. Several authors (Harbord, 1992; Cunningham, 2000) provide further reasons for not using it by resorting to all the negative aspects of the Grammar-Translation Method. These authors claim that the isolation of lexis from any real context prevents students from gleaning insights into the multiple uses and meanings of the word. Cunningham (2000) further contends that in an informal application, translation creates a hierarchy where the stronger students prevent the weaker students from contributing in the L2 by reinforcing a feeling of inferiority.

In short, translation in the language classroom has fallen from popularity into total oblivion. As a result and focusing on EFL teaching, translation activities don't seem to be present in the EFL classrooms. Suffice it to say that the most popular teaching

methods include only few or, in most cases, no translation activities at all. Also, the most popular EFL examinations do not include translation activities or if they do they constitute a separate examination.

3. Translation in the EFL Classroom: The return of the Prince?

Despite all the above, recent research is providing powerful evidence in favor of translation activities. An important foothold for translation comes from the studies of Second Language Acquisition. A great bulk of recent research in the field has been emphasizing the fact that the L1 can be a useful learning tool in both foreign language classrooms (Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo 2009; Alley 2005; Anton and Dicamilla 1999; Brooks and Donato 1994; Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez 2004) and immersion classrooms (Swain and Lapkin 2000). Translation forces learners to notice the language, in other words, to raise learner's overall language awareness. According to the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990; 1995) noticing triggers learning. The noticing hypothesis defends the extreme position that some kind of attention to form is a sine qua non condition for learning (Ellis, 1995; Leow, 2000; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990, 1995 inter alia). Whether essential or not, research seems to agree that noticing plays a crucial role in subsequent processing of L2 data (Leow, 1997; Robinson, 1997; Rosa and Leow, 2004; Rosa and O'Neill, 1999) and translation could be clearly placed among the elements likely to trigger off such noticing (see Gass, 1997 for a discussion).

In addition, in the classic volume by Gass and Selinker (1992) transfer is defined as "the use of the native language (or other language) knowledge –in some as yet unclear way– in the acquisition of a second (or additional) language" (Gass and Selinker, 1992: 234). Abundant research on Second Language Acquisition agrees that transfer affects virtually every area of language and that it is unavoidable when learning a foreign language. Translation can help students to become aware of positive and negative transfer and therefore minimize negative transfer and reinforce positive transfer.

Also, from a more pedagogical point of view, Paradowski (2007) recognizes the following benefits of translation activities, not as a method, but as a potent consciousness-raising tool:

– Through forcing the learner to find the most appropriate equivalent, translation activities have very positive impact on the students' TL production.
– Translation activities invite discussion and speculation in the classroom, thereby markedly raising the level of class interaction.
– Translation activities are a real life activity – something that the students will probably need to engage in if they intend to use the language in their occupation.
– Translation activities, with text taken as the basic linguistic unit, force the learner to pay careful attention to –and render meaning in– context, rather than merely on manipulating form as in mechanical, imitative, nonsensical grammar drills.
– Translation activities lead to an increased metacoginitve awareness: learners find out what they know, should know and do not know about the target language; thus, expose the 'gap' between the learners' IL and the target.

– Translation activities effectively contribute to the development of the student's linguistic self-awareness, improving both the understanding of the source language and the accuracy in the production of the TL.
– Translation activities are useful in the teaching of cognates and false friends.

4. Research questions

In the present study we test the effectiveness of a reverse translation activity (Spanish into English) in the acquisition of English by Spanish students in high school. On the basis of the literature review presented above, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Will the reverse translation activity help students to learn the structures "used to", "didn't use to", "to be used to"? Will students learn the relative pronouns? Will students learn the new vocabulary used in the translation?

In addition, in an attempt to test the effectiveness in terms of motivation we formulated a second research question:

2. Will the reverse translation activity motivate the students?

5. The study

This study was carried out with a group of 15 students in the 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education (the last of 4 years of Compulsory Secondary Education in Spain). Most of them are 15-16 years old and have been studying English for 8 years. According to internal school tests and following the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) their level was equated to an A2 level. The study took two school sessions and every session lasted 55 minutes. A teacher-researcher was in charge of the whole process.

In session 1 students were divided into 7 pairs and they were given a text to translate from Spanish into English with the following instructions:

– You can use the dictionaries.
– You can use the text books if you need to check grammar.
– You can ask questions.
– Both of the students in each pair have to write a part of the translation.
– Translate as much as you can but don't worry if you don't finish it.

The text used was especially designed for the activity by one of the authors of the present paper (Antón Remírez, see the text and one translation sample in Appendix 1). It had 196 words and included the following structures: "used to", "didn't use to", "to be used to" and "relative pronouns". These structures, together with the vocabulary in the text (see Appendix 2), had been seen in class and are the focus of the present research. As can be seen in appendix 1, together with the text, the students were also

given some explicit instructions on the use of the above mentioned structures. Also, in order to get the students involved in the activity, the text presented the form of a story with some basic gaps that they had to fill in in order to personalise the text, such as giving the names of the main characters of the story.

The teacher-researcher assessed and guided them continuously and there were bilingual dictionaries for each pair. Three of the pairs finished the translation; one of them almost finished it and the other three pairs did half of the text. Every time there was a vocabulary problem, the teacher-researcher explained it and wrote the terms on the blackboard so that they all could have the list as a reference.

In session 2, one week later, the students worked individually and received both individual feedback on their translation and some general whole-class feedback on the most common problems. As for the individual feedback, the teacher underlined the sentences/units where there was something wrong and they had to check and rewrite them. They showed a great interest in correcting their mistakes and worked very hard on this task.

Afterwards, the teacher gave them a post-test with 5 sentences to be translated from Spanish into English in order to check if the focused structures and vocabulary had been learnt. The sentences used were similar to those of the translated texts and included vocabulary and grammar structures (see the sentences and one translation sample in Appendix 3).

Finally, in order to answer the second research question, the students were asked to respond a questionnaire to check their motivation and to help them reflect on the activity and express their opinion about it. The teacher-researcher also offered a detailed account of her impressions.

6. Results and discussion

6.1. *Results of the post-test*

Table 1 features post-test results as regards the focused structures and vocabulary.

Table 1
Post-test results

Focused Item	Successfully Translated	Unsuccesfully Translated
Used to + inf.	9	6
To be used to + gerund	3	12
Relative pronouns	12	3
New vocabulary – To realize – To get dark – To spend time – UFO	13 14 11 13 11	2 1 4 2 4

According to these results we can conclude that the activity has been quite successful but not equally successful for every aspect under observation. Regarding the grammatical structures, the relative pronouns have obtained the best results as they have been successfully translated by 12 students. Next, the structure "used to" has also been quite successful with 9 students translating it correctly. Therefore, it seems that translation has really helped the students with these two structures. In stark contrast to this, the results obtained with the structure "be used to" show that the majority of students have not been able to translate it. The reasons to explain this difference could be of different nature. First of all, it may be connected to the difficulty of the structure *per se*. On the other hand, if we concentrate on the structures "used to" and "be used to", structures that are typically taught together, it is our belief that the negative results could be the consequence of teaching both of them at the same time. As these structures are similar but different both in content and form, teaching them together can result in students mixing them. In our view, it would be better to teach both structures separately.

As can be seen in Table 1, the best result obtained is related to the new vocabulary. Almost all of the students have been able to use the vocabulary correctly in the post-test. This also agrees with the results of the survey (that we will present in the following section) where the students agree that translation has mainly helped them with vocabulary.

In order to finish this section we would like to describe the most common problems as regards other factors that the students faced during the translation:

– Vocabulary problems: 3 pairs used "history" instead of "story".
– Verb tenses: students seem to have difficulties in using different verb tenses in the same activity.
– Students also show difficulties in the different uses and tenses of the verb "to be".
– Past tenses: The text is expressed in simple past and the students show difficulties with the use of this tense, especially with the use of the auxiliary didn't. The students use expressions such as: "no se dieron cuenta" – "they didn't to realize"; "no podían ver nada" – "they didn't saw anything", "didn't have to see anything", "they didn't seen nothing", "they weren't to see anything".

6.2. *Student's opinion*

The answer of the students in the questionnaire has been unanimous and very satisfactory (see Appendix 4). This confirms the general impression the teacher-researcher got during the activity. The students found the task interesting and different. Most of them found it of average difficulty or difficult and none of them considered it either too easy or unattainable. This fact is very important to make sure that the task is suitable for the different levels. The students agreed most of the times that they had mainly learnt vocabulary and grammar. Finally, all students would like to repeat the activity because their general impression is that of having learnt a lot.

These results coincide with the students' behaviour during the activities. They were first very surprised with the suggested activity. Working in pairs was very useful and motivating for them. It seems they hadn't translated before and some of them said in advance that they were not going to be able to do it. After a while the students were immersed in the translation, asking questions, creating discussion within the pair, using the dictionary, giving explanations to each other, showing understanding after explanations were given, all in all, showing interest in general.

6.3. *Teacher's views*

The teacher-researcher believes that the results of the questionnaire constitute very powerful evidence in favour of translation. The way the students worked in the activity was, in the opinion of the teacher, very positive, as they showed great interest, they felt encouraged, they activated previous knowledge and, in addition, they enjoyed translating.

The teacher further explained that the session dedicated to this activity *per se* was very profitable for the students. According to her observations several competences were developed, as the activity requires a huge search in our own language knowledge awaking constructions, words and increasing the awareness of the students' own resources. The students often commented they knew the word after having deduced the meaning together.

7. Final conclusions

The main results were the following ones:

(i) The majority of students have translated successfully: the structure "used to"; the sentence with relative pronouns together with a preposition; the new vocabulary.

(ii) The majority of students have not translated successfully the structure "be used to".

After having reviewed these results and, of course, taking into account the results of the questionnaire and the teacher's opinion, we can say that, in our view, we count on enough evidences that point at positive outcomes when using translation in the EFL classroom. Nevertheless, we are well aware of the limitations of the present work. We didn't count on a control group in this research, a larger pool of participants would make our results more robust and so would a larger number of structures and vocabulary items. Also, delayed post-tests would be necessary to see what happens in the long run.

The most surprising result in the present work has been, as already mentioned, students' failure to translate "to be used to". As a matter of fact, the negative results

obtained with "be used to" are the only really negative result of the activity. As explained before, the reason may be that mixing two similar structures ("be used to" and "to be used to") could exert a negative influence on both of them or, as it seems to be the case here, on one of them. The question for further research would be why has "used to" obtained positive results and "be used to" negative ones? Is "be used to" intrinsically more difficult? Consequently, another question for future research would be to explore the possibility that translation might help students to acquire only certain structures. As stated above, it would be also interesting to investigate if similar structures are better learnt separately.

The controversy surrounding the use of translation makes it necessary to keep on researching its effectiveness in language teaching. The present work aims to constitute a timid attempt to explore its value. In our view, the positive results obtained (as regards learning and motivation) seem to indicate that using translation does deserve a chance in the EFL classrooms.

8. References

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10. Acknowledgements

APPENDIX 1

A) The Text

Used to / Didn't use to/Be used to
Relative pronouns

Ésta es la historia de _____. Cuando tenía _____ años, solía ir a _____, un lugar que le gustaba mucho y en el que pasaba mucho tiempo. _____ estaba acostumbrado/a a estar solo/a pero cuando se sentía _____ solía llamar a _____, un amigo con quien solía jugar. No solían ir muy tarde porque el camino era largo. Un día, no se dieron cuenta, volvieron tarde y oscureció. Estaban asustados porque no podían ver nada. Después de un rato ya estaban acostumbrados a la oscuridad. Tenían que coger el camino que estaba cerca del río pero se perdieron. De repente, pensaron en sus familias. Sus padres solían preocuparse. No solían llegar después de las 8. A lo lejos, vieron dos luces y _____ pensó que era un OVNI.

—Un OVNI, ¿que es un OVNI?, preguntó _____.

—Un OVNI es un objeto volador que no está identificado. Un OVNI es un objeto que viene del espacio y que está lleno de extraterrestres.

—Oh no! Ahora nos llevarán y no volveremos nunca más!.

Pero _____ y _____ estaban demasiado acostumbrados/as a historias de terror. Las dos luces eran las luces del coche que les recogió.

_____

- **Used to** + infinitive: solía
- **Didn't use to** + infinitive: no solía
- **Be used to** + gerund: estar acostumbrado a
     Presente: (estoy acostumbrado)
             I am used to + gerund
             he/she is used to + gerund
             you/we/they are used to + gerund
     Pasado: (estaba acostumbrado)
             I /he/she was used to + gerund
             you/we/they were used to + gerund
- **Relative pronouns**: who (person) / which (thing) / where (place)

b) Translation Sample

Translation

Names:_____

This is the history of Oihane. When she was 8 years she used to went to Palencia, a place wich she like a lot and where she spend a lot of time. Oihane be was used to be alone but when she felt alone she used to called a friend calaled Sergio, a friend who used to play. They didn't use to went very late because the way was long. One day, they didn't realize, return late and darkened. They was afraid 'ecause they didn't saw anayting. After a while they be used to the dark. They must to take the way how was next the river but they get losted. Dudently they thought in their families. Their fathers be used to worry, they didn't use to arrive after 8. Far away they saw two ligh and they thought that it was a UFO.

– One UFO, what is a UFO? asked Sergio

– A UFO is a undentified flying object. A UFO is a object that comes from the space and it was full of aliens.

– Oh no! Now they will take us and we never returned.

But Oihane and Sergio was used to the terror histories, the two lights was the lights of the car that take us.

APPENDIX 2

List of terms

– Pasar tiempo: to spend time.
– Darse cuenta: to realize. It is explained that has nothing to do with "realizar" in Spanish.
– Oscurecer: to get dark. Some of the pairs didn't use the verb written on the blackboard and for "oscureció" they used expressions such as "darkened", "became darkness". This attempts are anyway welcomed as a proof of the use of strategies of students.
– OVNI: Objeto Volador No Identificado: UFO: Unidentified Flying Object.

APPENDIX 3

A) Post-test

Translate from Spanish into English:
Él solía tener muchos amigos cuando era pequeño
De repente me doy cuenta de que oscurece más tarde
Estoy acostumbrado a ir a la cama tarde
Un amigo es una persona con la que pasas mucho tiempo
Un OVNI es un objeto volador que no está identificado

b) Translation sample

He used to have a lot of friends when he was young
Suddenly I realize that get dark later
I be used to going bed late
A friend is a person who past with him a lot of time
An UFO is an flying object which isn't identified

APPENDIX 4

Questionnaire and Results

Question no. 1 "Had you ever translated before?"
Yes: 13 students; No: 2 students

Question no. 2: "Did you enjoy translating?"
I think it was boring: 0; I think it was interesting: 10 students; I think it was something different: 4 students; I think it was funny: 1 students

Question no. 3: "Did you find translating a difficult task?"
Very easy: 0; Easy: 1 student; Normal: 7 students; Difficult: 6 students; Very difficult: 1 student; Impossible: 0.

Question no. 4: "Write something you learnt"
Some of the answers given are: New words, new expressions, UFO, unidentified, actually, had you ever..., used to+inf., be used to+ger., get dark, realize, afterwards, suddenly.

Question no. 5: "Would you like to repeat the activity? Why?"
All of the students would like to repeat it. The main reasons given are: because I learn more English, because it is important that I can translate in the future, because it is interesting, because the activity is different and teach vocabulary, because I have learnt a lot of words, etc.